

Opinion In the race to boost regional economy, not all jobs are created equal

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We applaud Crain's for calling attention to an important new Metropolitan Planning Council report, ["The Cost of Segregation,"](#) in addition to [a thought-provoking op-ed by Amara C. Enyia](#). As both describe from their unique perspectives, durable strategies for achieving an inclusive regional economy have been frustratingly elusive.

What really isn't debatable, however, is that our seven-county region can't prosper for long if, despite a thriving overall economy, not all communities benefit. And there can be no denying that residents of high-poverty communities are often minorities without access to the high-quality education or ongoing training that today's job market increasingly requires. Even worse, during downturns, residents of economically disenfranchised communities are affected disproportionately—and this [negatively affects the region's economy as a whole](#).

Research connects economic inclusion to long-term economic growth. The International Monetary Fund found a strong correlation between 119 countries' respective income equity and their ability to sustain economic growth. They also found that, generally, a 10 percent decrease in inequality increases a growth period's expected length by 50 percent.

The overall economy of our seven counties and 284 municipalities will benefit significantly if we succeed at bringing prosperity to high-poverty communities; if we fail to do that, metropolitan Chicago would at best fail to tap into its true economic potential and, at worst, could see long-term negative consequences as global trends—including automation—erode jobs available for lower-skilled workers.

Our agency refers to this as "inclusive growth," which will be an overarching principle of the ON TO 2050 plan that CMAP and its partners are now developing. Slated for adoption in October 2018, the plan will strategize ways our region can make more effective use of its resources, including underutilized land, labor and infrastructure.

All jobs are not created equal, and we should focus resources like workforce training in globally competitive industry clusters—economic specializations in our region—that give workers a path to upward mobility. Transportation logistics, business services, and metalworking technology, for example, are industries that, due to their unique processes and products, can open multiple job pathways. Business services is among just a handful of metropolitan Chicago clusters with more jobs than in 2001, but nearly 90 percent of those additional jobs required at least an associates degree.

While it is premature to conclude exactly what ON TO 2050 will say about inclusive growth, some preliminary thoughts include:

1. Support creation of jobs in clusters that give under- and unemployed workers the opportunity for advancement even without advanced degrees.
2. Among criteria for infrastructure investments, weigh their ability to raise the capacity and prosperity of disinvested areas through business creation and better transportation choices for residents to access jobs, among other metrics.
3. Promote reinvestment and provide technical assistance, training, and capacity building support to economically disconnected areas.
4. Closely track which industry clusters provide middle- to high-wage jobs, as well as [clusters that are growing or shrinking](#).

Without an inclusive regional approach, future globalization and automation will exact an even greater toll on our low-skilled workers. By focusing now on initiatives to enhance their skills and opportunities, we can enable these residents and communities to participate fully in the economy, which will benefit every single one of us.

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